



Marketing of food and taste

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Marketing is one of the words that we here often at for various reasons, but even the professionals who use it will often give different definitions for it, if we ask them about it. Their opinion depends on their understanding of the term, based on education, profession, and even the sphere they work in – cosmetics, automotive, apparel, leisure, travel, etc. Very often, this word is used as a synonym for advertising, sales or even unethical practices (such as selling unhealthy drinks to children or selling ice to Eskimos), for creating hassle around new products in the store (a new collection, or a new model that must be noticed), for promoting an event (a Madonna concert) or a company (Google, Nestle, Bella Bulgaria, Happy or McDonalds restaurants). In fact, *marketing is the way companies think and act when they must realize on the market a given product that the buyers are looking for*. It is at the base of any business, while at the base of every successful business there is at least one defining marketing decision – an innovative product; the right place and time for offering a certain good; an attractive combination of menu presentation, service, good food and agreeable prices.

The “product” that companies offer can be an actual physical good, like bread (carefully curated along the shelves) or a service (like getting your bread delivered straight to your house). McDonald’s, for example, doesn’t create actual goods, in spite of Big Mac, Kids’ Menu, etc., but is, in fact, a **retailer** offering its customers the service of quick and easy access to a familiar meal. Put differently, in the remote 1948, the McDonald’s brothers of San Bernardino, CA, did not create the burger and the fries, but *the system of actions, which allows food to move from the kitchen to the customer in the quickest way possible at the lowest possible cost* (sparing resources such as staff effort, electricity, water, foodstuffs), in order to be able to offer *the lowest price possible*. We must also add that the familiar menu is also part of this service, as it represents the full assortment of the chain, which is almost completely standardized all over the world. The same goes for the restaurants’ locations – carefully selected spots with a high flow of both human and automotive traffic, aiming for the highest number of potential customers. This is why, as should already be clear, the keyword is not just “food” but also “fast” – both for the hungry person, who doesn’t want to spend time waiting in lines or paying expensive meals at refined restaurants with waiters and a gourmet menu, and for McDonald’s as a company, who wants to be efficient.

1. MARKETING MIX

How will all this happen in practice? “Marketing” the products would mean estimating what is being sought on the market (what people are still missing for solving a certain problem), so that it can be produced and offered; estimating where it should be offered (various bottles of water can be found at your local shop, the gas station, the café, at restaurants, at the bus station vending machines, etc.); at what price the product will be sold, so that it is interesting to the customer but doesn’t appear too expensive; and finally, what we would say about the product – i.e. how we will advertise it, so that people know it even exists, they learn about its attractive features and about why it’s even worth the money (we usually call all of this communication). In other words, marketing works with a combination of four main elements, which are known as the “**marketing mix**” or the 4 P’s (Product, Price, Placement, Promotion), which you can see in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Basic marketing mix.

The marketing mix was officially entered into practice in 1960 and has since been a basic mainstay for companies, quite the same way the four legs of a table serve to keep it steady and usable. The reason it still exists today – even with the immense possibilities of the Internet and the thousands of digital products and online shops – is that the mix has survived through time and possesses the four principles (or measures) according to which all product creation and placement functions, no matter whether software, mobile communications, transport, soap, massages or burgers.

So, shaping the mix, with which marketing specialists work, depends on:

Marketing goals of a given company (e.g. releasing a new product, diversification of an existing product [cheeseburger, veggie burger, pizza burger, etc.], attracting new customers, entering foreign markets, etc.)

Product type (goods or **services**, fast-moving consumer goods [daily use, such as bread, milk, cookies, etc.]; slower-moving goods [durable goods such as bread machine, car, shoes]; business-to-business [delivery of products or professional kitchen equipment for restaurants]; or end clients [the restaurant itself, where we are served a complete dish]).

Target group being served (e.g. children, teens, adults, women or men, families, sports enthusiasts, diabetics, vegetarians, etc.)

Market structure (type and size of competing companies, substituting products and services, size and growth of demand, etc.).

Competitor behavior (larger chains prefer larger cities, McDonald's pick highways and city centers; what pricing they apply; what their delivery range is; what their target groups are; where, how and how much they advertise; etc.)

Cultural specifics – these may include predominant local religion, language, customs and holidays, eating habits (in the USA, a Christmas turkey is customary, whereas in Bulgaria the custom includes lean and meatless breads, sarmi/dolmas, which are closely connected to the agricultural traditions and products of the region), typical foods (pizza, hamburger, banitsa, kanafeh, sushi, moussaka, paella, etc.), as well as the foodstuffs, which are produced locally. For example, in Great Britain tea with milk is preferred to coffee, and the typical "local" dish is Fish & Chips, whereas in Italy the culinary and coffee culture is more sophisticated, relying on a much larger number of local producers, so giants such as Starbucks and McDonald's find it more difficult to develop their business there.)

Market positioning – through their marketing activities, companies consolidate a certain image in front of their clients (e.g. Lidl is known as a "**hard discounter**" because it aims to attract customers by offering low prices. At the same time, they have weekly discount campaigns, which doesn't mean that the chain offers low quality goods, but rather wants to position itself as close to the customer, because it has stores virtually

everywhere and offers the most important goods and wares, while providing a balance between price and quality).

Product portfolio – rarely a company offers just a single good or service (even at the local market you will find various items at the same stall), so the marketing mix depends on all products that the company must place on the market.

2. MARKETING AND FOOD

When speaking about realization on the food market, we must think about something very specific. *Firstly*, food is something that we cannot live without, so we will always need to search for it (several times a day) and to buy it, but *secondly*, it is usually presented to us (mostly city folk) as fresh, packaged, semifinished or completely cooked meals. Each of these different types of food products is being offered to us in a different way – on the shelves, at the booth, on the table, and it's also differently "tasty" to us, due to the occasion. It would probably not be very romantic if we were to open a can of baked beans at a restaurant, during a first date. Oftentimes, we do not even remember what we had for dinner yesterday, because we just prepared something at home, which took a lot of time and effort, but was so "automated" that we simply perceive it as something we just ate so that we don't go to bed hungry.

It is important to state that food marketing is highly dependent on the fluidity of **trends**, as well as on the possibilities of offering a certain food product on certain markets. For example, in Bulgaria fish and seafood have experienced a growth spurt, thanks to rapid delivery from Greece, after the former country entered the European Union, and thanks to direct connections with other destinations, such as Italy, Japan and Norway, bringing not only products, but also skills for preparing the food. It is certain that you would doubt the quality of a seafood dish, prepared by a Serbian barbeque master just as much as you would doubt a pleskavica (Serbian pancake-shaped version of burger), prepared by a Greek fisherman. Why is that so? Because it is impossible for the local natural resources not to have influenced the local culinary skills and traditions.

Furthermore, increased mobility makes it possible for us to prefer to purchase prepackaged or semifinished food and to frequent restaurants, cafes and street vendors, or to simply order food online.

Regarding food and specifically – its taste, marketing activities are very intensive. Inevitably, our relatives and friends have influenced our tastes, but we are all influenced by the companies, who offer foods and beverages in various shapes and sizes. The direct link between communication (advertising) and distribution (points of sale) when it comes to food is very strong. We (especially city folk who don't grow their own food) often encounter our food in the following locations:

- Booths at the markets (the local shop or the farmers' market)
- Supermarkets and grocery stores

- Restaurants
- Street food locations (where we often find sandwiches or sliced pizza) where a relatively short menu offers specialized foods (hot-dogs, Chinese, etc.)
- Food delivery platforms (some are owned by restaurants who offer their own delivery, while others are simply intermediaries between multiple food joints and the end customers).

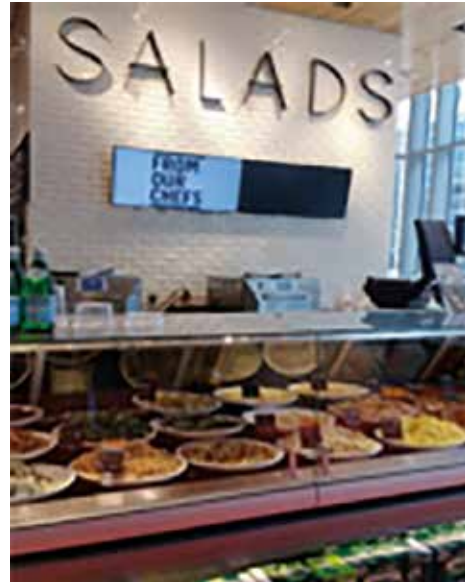


Fig. 2. Receipt and tastes communication in the form of a book (by „Shefs Manchev and Shishkov“) produced by Lidl (lefthand side) and ready to eat salads' glass-case in Lablavs, Toronto, Canada.
Images: novini.bg („The “Manchev vs. Shishkov” continues“, 13.11.2015) and by the author (2017)

All the abovementioned locations have their own approach at advertising. They differ mostly based on the presence of a live salesperson, from whom you can learn more about the stuff you are interested in trying or buying, as well as on the environment where your transactions with the people and the food are taking place. Think of the waiter, who often explains details about the menu or the ingredients in a certain dish, or directly recommends a certain specialty or a very fresh dish (i.e. influences our choice); or think of the old woman, selling bunches of parsley at the open market; or of the way that a certain chef will influence our choice of restaurant.



Fig. 3. The renovated interior of Lidl supermarket (Ring Mall, Sofia).
Images by author.

Nobody will say that the food they are offering is bad, old, full of nitrates, etc. On the contrary, whether vocally, or through appetite-inducing images and text, they will tell us how fresh their offerings are, how pure and authentic, based on "traditional recipes", with a "unique flavor", "exotic", etc. Similarly, when shopping at the grocery store, our choice is influenced by TV commercials (usually sausages and meats, chicken, vegetables, spices, seafood, pasta, dairy, etc.), the posters, display placements, packaging (Fig. 3), which we encounter at the store, while we are actively looking for products ("fresh", "promo", "bio", "new", "discount"), but also by the personnel, who provide us with information. In online platforms, the human factor is almost completely absent, which turns them into a sort of colorful catalog of menus and dishes, which can be delivered to us.

3. ILLUSTRATION OF MARKETING FOR ORGANIC FOOD

When we consider the aforementioned guiding principles of marketing, we could analyze the peculiarities that arise when marketing *organic food products*. The very fact that we need to underline the difference between them and "regular" foods is already a sign that the approaches for these two product categories are different. The differences, actually, cover all aspects of all marketing activities, since the marketing mix elements generally influence one another.

As a general rule, organic products must have been manufactured (grown) under certain conditions, which will guarantee their "organic-ness", i.e. their "high quality", their "purity" and, naturally their "unique taste". At least for the time being, most widespread grocery chains prefer to work with large production volumes and with packaging which guarantees a longer shelf life, and with prices much lower than those that organic producers can offer. This is why organic products can more easily be found in specialized "bio" shops.

Before we introduce the peculiarities, it must be noted that organic foods, as a "product", did not appear on the market by accident. In the markets, where grocery stores have been offering, for decades, cheap, industrially produced food (most frequently treated with herbicides and pesticides), one can observe that this food can lead to the contradiction of effecting negatively on people's health, on the environment, in parallel with being unpleasant to consume, while available at such vast quantities that guarantee a large amount of waste. Consequently, comments from buyers, culinary experts, chefs and manufacturers, have signaled to predominantly smaller producers that organic food could present an opportunity (i.e. increase in demand). Thus, organic food has become a natural counterpoint to industrial, and often genetically modified, food. This provides an impetus to the mechanisms of the four elements of the marketing mix.

In order to correspond to its "sophisticated" image, organic food needs to be packaged in ecological, attractive and

modern-looking **packaging** (e.g. made from recycled paper, with natural colors [green, brown, and other “earthly” colors]). Sometimes, the packaging may be completely translucent, to allow the customer to examine its contents and to enhance the perception of “freshness”, but it must always present all the needed information and carry all certificates of origin. Too many technical terms on the label are not recommended – on the contrary, unclear language may act as a deterrent, against the principle of attractiveness at the point of sale.

The Pricing policy of the producers needs to take into consideration the type of products they are offering. Usually, prices are formed as a result of research, looking at how much customers would be willing to spend, which, on the other hand, is strongly affected by the economic circumstances (are people at ease regarding their jobs, their income, their expenses, etc.). This influences their choice to consume “organic” products and to observe a healthier diet altogether. Most often, advertising resources in this sector are much lower than in “regular” food trade, which does not add heft to the end price.

Naturally, prices are consistent with manufacturing expenses of the products, and with shipping and delivery expenses. Attention must be paid to the prices of “regular” products, since customers intuitively make the comparison. A study demonstrates that, in order to be effective, organic food prices must not exceed regular food prices by more than 50% – or, put more precisely, practice shows that organic foods generally keep a 10-20% overhead on regular foods, and rarely exceed 40%.

As far as distribution goes, an increasing number of large chains are joining the distribution network for organic products, since they see the increase in demand even within their own target groups. They, however, separate these products in special sectors and present them as “special” offers, seeing as these foods are different from the rest that can be found in the store. The point of sale must not be underestimated because of the customers’ perception of the **“authenticity”**, “quality” and “guarantees” of these products. Additionally, more and more web shops and platforms are shortening the distance between producer and buyer, which additionally decreases the price of the product and increases trust between both sides.

Since organic products are more attractive to the fans of “traditional” cuisine and “diet/healthy” food, more specialized advertising is needed for them (mostly highlighting authenticity and taste) and some specific promotional offers. We must not forget that the price of these products is generally higher, when they are offered in the general stores, and it needs to be justified, at least by underscoring the higher quality, as well as by bundled offers, which can increase the purchase volume, while also giving the customer the impression that he or she has received a discount. Shopping is not always driven by rational/practical reasons (“I need to feed myself today”), but on the contrary, it’s connected to certain emotions. In the case of organic foods, these emotions are the customer’s sat-

isfaction, stemming from the idea that she or he will prepare a certain meal with these biologically clean, authentic and real-tasting products, and will provide a healthy and tasty meal for her or his family, while simultaneously supporting small-scale producers, who are also ecologically superior to their larger counterparts; or that the purchase of high quality products will give her or him the perception of a higher standard of life and make her or him look better in other people's eyes. Due to these reasons, very often the communication highlights the origin and authenticity of the food – posters with lush meadows are placed near the products, images of happy cows and piglets, as well as photos of traditional farms and farmers, which aim to “guarantee” the quality of the produce and the taste qualities of the food (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Examples for communication of organic food.
 Images: foodnavigator-usa.com ("Organic Trade Association: US retail sales of organics grew 11,5% to \$35.1 bn in 2013", 12.05.2014) and goodtoknow.co.uk ("What is organic food and what does organic mean? All your organic food questions answered...", 17.09.2018).

The media, where we can see adverts for organic foods, are generally all known media – newspapers, magazines, posters, TV spots, radio, internet. However, it's not direct advertising that is most effective here, but rather information, delivered as an article, analysis or interview with a professional chef, sports person, nutritionist or farmer. This is due to the fact that this manner of advertising does not annoy, while people are more inclined to pay attention and to trust experts, or at least people who present themselves as “experts”. We should not exclude personal recommendation from other users of organic products, which can be encountered in forums, on social media and in different blogs. The power of this approach has proven to be great, especially when keeping in mind the conflicting opinions, which have become so turbulent online, ever since organic farming and veganism became more mainstream. For the abovementioned target groups, interested in organic foods, it is important that the benefits of these products are highlighted, as well as their specific properties, which give them advantage when compared to regular products; also, it is useful to underline their quality standards and the overall guarantee that these users are buying genuine organic products.

The challenges in the marketing of organic foods come from some barriers existing in especially developed markets, which can interfere with their growth. Experts in the field see such barriers in the lack of willingness in many producers to become better informed about the specifics and processes typical for organic agriculture, but also in the lack of financing, which is needed in the starting cycles of transforming from industrial to organic production, which can be very expensive, and thus – not especially attractive.

Additionally, distribution is causing problems, since organic products are not as durable and it is almost impossible to ship them across great distances, plus they have a shorter shelf life. For large chains it is often unprofitable to support low quantities from multiple small producers, which can complicate distribution and add weight to the end price.

Last, but not least, society, which is composed of buyers of organic foods, should become much better informed by independent organizations and state bodies regarding the advantages of consuming such products, and quality standards for the delivered food should be observed closely.